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On the Abuse of Reason, as applied to the mysterious Doctrines
of Revelation.

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A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT
THE PRIMARY VISITATION
OF
The Right Reverend the LORD BISHOP^{Porteus} OF LONDON,

Held at COLCHESTER, May 17, 1790.

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On the Subject of Rights, as applied to the mysterious Disasters
of Reckless.

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LUKE XI. 35.

Take heed, therefore, that the Light which is in thee be not Darknefs.

THE improved state of science, and the general diffusion of knowledge and philosophical inquiry, in the times in which we live, have procured this advantage, among others, to the rational advocates of Christianity, that they are no longer required or expected to be the apologists of human reason, or to justify its application to the faith. This subject is now well and generally understood. Nothing that concerns man, whether it relate to his present, or his future happiness—to what he is to *do*, or to what he is to *believe*—can possibly be such, as to exclude the use of that reason, which God has given him for his guide.

Yet this guide, which in all things *must* be followed, in all things *may* mislead us. How easily *the light which is in us is made darknefs*, by our prejudices and our pas-

sions, the proudest advocate of reason cannot be insensible, and they, perhaps, know best, who trust it most. The necessity, therefore, of the caution to which our Saviour exhorts us, of *taking* the utmost *heed* lest we abuse our reason, is no less evident than the necessity of using it. But if, in every application of it, this caution be indispensable, it is peculiarly so when we apply it to religion—to that revelation, which God has been graciously pleased to vouchsafe to man, in order to assist his fallible and wandering reason by the guidance of a brighter and a steadier light. Highly, then, does it concern every man, who, in any way, applies his understanding to the word of God, whether to examine, to interpret, to defend, or to oppose—highly does it concern him to reflect, that here, if the light of reason be darkened, and in proportion as it is darkened, the light of the gospel will be darkened with it; and, in this sense, we may well ask ourselves, in the words of our Saviour—“*how great will be THAT darkness*?*”

In no age of the gospel have men been sufficiently sensible of this truth. Both the friends and the enemies of Christianity have applied their reason with no more—I had almost said with *less*—reserve or caution, to a book, by the one acknowledged to be the word of God, and to the others offering itself *as* such, than they would have

* John vi. 23.

done to a book of indifferent speculation, or unimportant fact.

To set this truth in its full view by enumerating *all* the instances in which men have misapplied reason and philosophy to revelation, would far exceed the limits of a discourse of this kind. I confine myself to a single instance; to a slight and imperfect sketch of the errors to which human reason has shewn itself to be liable, when it is employed about the MYSTERIOUS DOCTRINES of revealed religion.

The FIRST of these errors was, the presuming to *comprehend* and *explain* such doctrines.—This error, besides its *immediate* ill effects, upon the purity of the gospel, and the peace of the Christian world, gave occasion to a SECOND error, in the *enemies* of revelation, who were led to reject it, on account of those doctrines, which their reason could not comprehend, but which its *friends*, by their own attempts to explain them, had inconsiderately allowed to be fit objects of *rational inquiry*. Lastly, these two errors have produced a THIRD, which may be regarded as peculiarly the error of our own times;—that misapplication of philosophy to revealed religion, which attempts to reduce all its doctrines, without distinction, to *philosophical truth*.

1. In different times, different modes of error prevail. From the earliest ages of the church to the Reformation,

the principal wounds, which Christianity received, it received from the abuse of reason in its *friends*; and the most striking and fatal instance of that abuse was the attempt to *comprehend mysteries*, and the subsequent presumption of *explaining* them, drawing *inferences* from them, and erecting those explanations and inferences into doctrines of scripture and articles of faith *.

It has been said, that “ where mystery begins, religion “ ends :”—a proposition, which, presented thus, as a detached aphorism, without restriction or explanation, is, at least, ambiguous, and liable to be understood in a sense, and applied to a purpose, very different from those of the respectable author in whom it is found †.

Thus much, however, we may safely say; that where mystery begins, *religious inquiry* ends, or *ought* to end. But there was a time, when the contrary principle seemed to prevail; when the intemperate curiosity and vanity of men seem almost to have led them to the persuasion, that religion both begins and ends with mystery: or, at least, that no parts of scripture were worthy of *rational* investigation, in comparison with those that were above reason; and that scarce any difficulties deserved to be combated, but such as, from their very nature, it is impossible to overcome.

* See Mosheim's Eccles. Hist. vol. i. p. 246, sect. xii.

† See Foster's Sermons, vol. i. the sermon on *Mystery*.

This,

This, then, may justly, perhaps, be regarded as the first and principal source of those lamentable corruptions, by which the perverse reason and the incorrigible passions of mankind have so fully verified the prediction of our Lord, that “ *he came not to send peace on earth, but a sword* *.”

I know not of any object, that can possibly be presented to the contemplation of man, so calculated to excite at once his astonishment and his indignation, as the comparison of the *history* of Christianity with *Christianity itself*, as contained in the holy scriptures.—I know not of any question, that can possibly be proposed, more interesting to a Christian, and especially to the teachers of Christianity, than that which inquires, *why* the gospel has, eventually, produced effects so strikingly opposite to those, which it was its declared *purpose*, and its evident *tendency*, to produce?—It condemns hatred, variance, persecutions, wars—and it has been made to produce them. It urges unity, and has caused dissension. It forbids us to *strive about words*, and for *words* the blood of thousands has been shed. If we ask, *whence come* these things, the apostle will furnish us with a *general* answer. They come *from our lusts* †—from the various perverse and ungoverned passions of mankind. But that which stands foremost to our view, when we

* Matt. x. 34.

† James iv. 1.

turn over the pages of the ecclesiastical historian, is, the prodigious and complicated variety of *opinions* about the sense of scripture, and the innumerable divisions, heresies, and sects, by which, in consequence, the simple purity of the gospel was corrupted, and "*Christ divided*.*" These were the *materials* of contention; and of these materials there is no source so fertile as this misapplication of rational deduction to those revealed doctrines which are clearly without the bounds of reason. For, unhappily, when once men are determined to explain *every thing*, the number of different explanations will always be in proportion to the obscurity of the thing to be explained. *Difficult* passages of scripture admit of *several* explanations; but that which is totally inexplicable, if we *will*, at all hazards, explain it, admits of explanations without number. Where we *must* be wrong, no limits can easily be assigned to the number of ways in which we *may* be wrong. Hence, the endless multiplication of religious opinions, the divisions and subdivisions of heresy, and the proportional increase of mutual animosity and hatred. Hence, intolerance, persecution, wars, and all the sad train of unchristian evils, that followed from the pride, the obstinacy, and other selfish and dissocial passions of mankind; above all, from that propensity of human nature, which most men

* 1 Cor. i. 13.

find it so difficult, even in the most trifling matters, to subdue—the propensity to make our *own* minds the measure of the minds of other men; our *own* opinions and views of things, the standard of what, we think, *ought* to be the opinions and the views of others. And this disposition, which, even in matters of mere taste and indifferent fancy, is too apt to produce some degree of animosity and mutual ill-liking, and to introduce a species of intolerance even into the intercourse of common life—this disposition, in *religious* matters, acquires force in proportion to the importance of the subject; for here, whoever differs from us, is considered as differing, not from *us* only, but from the word of God himself. From this persuasion, there is but a single and a short step to intolerance and persecution; to *religious* wars, and *conscientious massacres*; to that last and most consummate perversion both of religion and of reason—the doing *injury* to our fellow-creatures “WITH GOOD-WILL, “*as to the Lord, and not to men**.”

These mischiefs might have been, in a great measure, prevented, by the observance, as far as it is practicable, of this rule, which common sense seems to suggest—never to draw any *inferences* from mysterious doctrines, which are plainly not *fully* comprehensible by us, as they stand revealed in scripture; and therefore never, in such case,

* Ephes. vi. 7.

to depart from the very *expressions* of scripture; for this obvious reason, that, where the meaning is, confessedly, above our reach, we can never be sure, that we say the *same thing*, any longer, than while we say it in the *same words*. If we depart from this rule, we *interpret*, we *infer*, we substitute, for aught we *know*, our own conjectural explanations and conclusions for the word of God. We do little more than translate, at a venture, from a language we do not understand.

To the neglect of a rule so obvious and important, various causes have, without doubt, contributed. The two reigning sects of pagan philosophy, which, by turns, prevailed in the church, were singularly calculated to encourage the erroneous theology of the times. The mystic fancy, and the sublime obscurities, of PLATO, served to nourish the love of mystery and *hidden senses* *; while the analytical accuracy of ARISTOTLE taught men to be expert in the dangerous art of *distinguishing* one mystery into many.—But the source of all was the intellectual pride of idle and speculative men, who debased the *word of life* into an amusement of their understandings, and an exercise of their acuteness and ingenuity. Hence, *all* was to be understood, and *all* explained. The veil which God has drawn over those *secret things* that *belong unto himself*, instead of repressing their pre-

* See Mosheim's Eccl. Hist. vol. i. p. 225.

sumption,

sumption, served only to irritate their curiosity. The most mysterious doctrines of scripture were selected and preferred as the fittest subjects of speculation; and something, unhappily, they held it necessary to *say*, even where nothing could possibly be *meant* *.

Thus the simple language of scripture was abandoned; new terms were invented; the definition of those terms gave rise to others; fresh explanations were the seeds of fresh heresies; and of heresy itself, it may justly be regarded as one of the greatest mischiefs, that it engenders explanation and detail, and multiplies, without necessity, and without authority, articles of faith. For the experience of ages will warrant the assertion, that he, who reduces a speculative theologian to the necessity of distinguishing and defining, however innocently he may seem to be employed, is probably, *in the event*, doing considerable harm to religion and to mankind.

2. But the injuries, which religion receives from this abuse of reason in its *friends*, are yet more extensive and complicated. If, as we have already seen, such abuse frustrates the *end* of revelation, by corrupting its doctrines, and

* "It were vain to dissemble, that revelation, as well as reason, leaves us *ignorant* of many things we might wish to know. I only maintain, that we should not *pretend* to know more than we do. No advantage can arise from the use of *words* without *ideas*, from whatever authority we derive them." Dr. Balguy's Discourses, &c. p. 237.

destroying peace and charity, it will be found, on the other hand, to have lent arms to its *enemies*, and enabled them to turn it, as it were, against itself, by arguing on the false principles of its defenders.

Among the numerous objections produced by that general ferment of reason and free inquiry, which followed the dispersion of papal darkness, and the revival of letters, at the Reformation, none have been more confidently urged, than those drawn from the mysterious nature of Christianity; a religion, which cannot, it is contended, be admitted by reason, because it contains doctrines which reason cannot comprehend.

Thus the abuse of reason, as applied to mystery by the *friends* of revelation, has produced, or, at least, encouraged, a similar abuse in its *adversaries*;—similar in its *principles*, though opposite in its *purpose*. For the divine who attempts to explain a mystery, and the philosopher who rejects it because he cannot explain it, both equally proceed upon the false and arrogant supposition, that God could not possibly propose to the belief of man, in a revelation of his will, any truths, but such as are perfectly level to his understanding.

This difficulty, however, which some men find so insuperable, of believing mysteries, would soon be removed, if they did not confound a *mystery* with an *unintelligible proposition*. That we cannot *believe* a proposition, the

terms of which we do not, in any degree, understand, is certain. This would be the belief of *nothing*. But we may, surely, upon sufficient evidence, believe a proposition, without a full insight into the *relation* between the terms of which it consists; without a perfect comprehension of the *manner* in which they are connected. We do, in fact, every day *believe mysteries*, in common life; that is, we continually admit things as *true*, upon satisfactory authority, of which we neither *perceive* the *truth*, nor *comprehend* the *reason*. We do no more than this, when we assent to the mysteries of our faith *.

I cannot avoid remarking, farther, that it seems not always easy to reconcile to each other the different arguments employed by the adversaries of revelation. When we hold out to them the pure *morality* of the gospel, they object, that it is only a *republication of the religion of nature*; that a revelation from heaven of that, which conscience teaches, and has *always* taught men, is *unnecessary*. When we shew them its *mysteries*, they object, that it is irrational.

* The reader will find the same thing, stated with more clearness and precision, and illustrated in a masterly manner, by Dr. Balguy, p. 238, 239, of his admirable volume of *Discourses on Various Subjects*. Some degree of resemblance to those pages, makes it necessary to inform the reader, that this Sermon was written three years before those Discourses were published; when I was appointed to preach on a similar occasion, but was prevented by illness.—No man, I presume, would unnecessarily subject himself to the discredit of plagiarism, where even the slightest coincidence would do him so much honour.

Thus,

Thus, they reject it, both because it is *level* to our understandings, and because it is *above* them. They expect it should bear some *marks* of its divine origin; such marks they refuse to recognize in the intelligible and moral doctrines of scripture; and yet, they will not admit those marks to be, where alone, according to their *own* reasoning, they *can* be—in those sublimer communications that are, at present, above our comprehension *.—Had revelation, indeed, been *all* intelligible and moral, they might, with some *shew* of reason, have objected to it; as they might, also, with much *more* reason, had it been *all* sublime and incomprehensible. Now, they reject it, when it contains precisely such an intermixture of *revealed truth*, and *moral precept*, as might be expected in a religion that *came* from *God*, and was intended for the *use* of *man*.

3. I shall trace these wanderings of intellectual presumption but one step farther.—That the inaccurate reason of less enlightened ages should have mistaken its province, and a scholastic and fanciful philosophy have been applied to the corruption of religion, we have little cause to wonder, though much to lament. We may justly be both concerned and surprised, when we see the severer reason and sounder philosophy of later times still subject to the same perversion, and still unmindful of their proper

* See Bp. Hurd's Sermons, vol. ii. p. 86.

limits. That cautious and *experimental* procedure, that scrupulous jealousy of hypothetic reasoning, and that dread of *intruding into the things it hath not seen*, which characterizes our philosophy in all *other* subjects, it seems *there* only disposed to lay aside, where it is of the most indispensable necessity, and where, if we neglect it, our error is surely something worse than merely that of philosophizing falsely.—I speak of those *friends* of Christianity, who, from a desire of shewing its *reasonableness*, have endeavoured to lower its revealed doctrines into philosophical truth. Thus error begets error, and one extreme produces its opposite. Disgusted, as well they might be, with the vain attempts of the mysterious divinity of former ages, and struck with their pernicious effects, men have, even with the best intention, been hurried into the opposite excess. They have been eager to obviate the objections of unbelievers, by applying themselves to shew, that the faith of those, who were willing, on *other* accounts, to listen to the evidences of Christianity, needed not to be exposed to so severe a trial, as that of an assent to any truths which reason cannot fully comprehend.—And thus, the abuses of reason in earlier times, have, since, been the causes, in *part* at least, of the *rejection* of revelation by some, and of a *partial admission* of it by *others*. In those, who were not well disposed to receive it, they have, at least, *encouraged* infidelity; and have produced, in others, a sort of modified and compromising Christianity.

Of

Of all these errors the principle is the same. The same intellectual pride, acting, indeed, in different directions, as determined by the passions and opinions of different men, and different times, has led the *scholastic Theologian* presumptuously to multiply the mysteries of our faith, by drawing them out into explanations equally or more mysterious; the *incredulous Philosopher*, to reject a revelation that accords not with his reason; and the *philosophical Christian*, to reconcile his *faith* and his *understanding*, by forcing down the one to a level with the other.

Thus do all the misapplications of reason to revelation by its unguarded *friends* conspire to assist the same misapplication by its *enemies*; and again, by a sort of moral reaction, the abuses of its enemies have increased and aggravated the abuses of its defenders.—From the whole of this various combination, this mutual play and alternation of error, Religion suffers. Its *doctrines* are corrupted, or mutilated; its *end* perverted, or defeated; its *truth* denied, or called in question.

It might be added, that these errors conspire also to encourage the opposite error, of those, who conclude, from the acknowledged *abuse* of reason in religion, against its *use*. But this is now the error only of the rankest superstition or fanaticism. It exists in those only, in whom it is incurable. With men who have renounced their understandings, all argument is vain.

I can

I can form no better wish for the happiness of mankind, than, that the reflections I have been making might justly be considered as useless. But we are yet, I fear, far distant from that happy period of perfection, which will exempt us from the painful necessity of looking back upon our errors.

It is, indeed, astonishing, to a thinking and unprejudiced man, who stands aloof from the world, and takes a calm and philosophical view of things—it is astonishing to see how unwilling men have been, and still are, to profit by the experience of so many ages; how reluctantly they are dragged to the discovery of their own true interest and happiness.

But the purposes of Heaven, however the perverseness of man may have been permitted to counteract and retard them, cannot be frustrated. That gospel, which men have been so ingenious to abuse and to pervert, has, notwithstanding, forced its way into their hearts, and produced a degree of improvement in the general manners and temper of mankind, though not such as might have been expected, yet such, surely, as prejudice alone can refuse to see, or ingratitude to acknowledge.

On the other hand—let not those abuses, to which human reason will ever be liable, indispose us to attribute to the improvement of science, the progress of true philosophy,

sophy, and the general cultivation of knowledge, a considerable share in the production of these blessings.

Let us be thankful, that these improvements have strengthened the foundations of Christianity. New light has been thrown on the evidences, the doctrines, and even the morality, of the gospel; and much of this light we owe to the very efforts of its enemies to obscure its glory. If reason has still its perversities and its errors, they are, happily, no longer such as inflame the passions of mankind, or lead on to intolerance and persecution. Men are ever more indulgent to the opinions of others, in proportion as they are more reasonable in their own.

If there be any duty which it is incumbent upon *us* zealously to discharge, it is that of contributing, by every means in our power, to these advancements in the *religion*, the *reason*, and, in consequence, the *happiness*, of mankind. *This* is a zeal that cannot be intemperate; a zeal, not for a vestment, a day, an idle ceremony, or a disputable opinion—but, a zeal to promote the welfare, temporal and eternal, of our fellow-creatures, and, in so doing, to concur with the gracious views of that merciful Being, who sent his Son, to *guide our feet into the way of peace*.

To this great end we cannot more effectually contribute, than by a *proper* and *cautious* application of our reason to that religion which is our “*reasonable service*.”

vice."—Thus, only, will Faith and Reason, which the perverseness of man, not the nature of things, has set at variance, be perfectly united; and Philosophy, which is THE LOVE of WISDOM, become, at length, the firmest friend and associate of THE WISDOM THAT IS FROM ABOVE.

F I N I S.



